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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1031
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 2212
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 9235
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 7485
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5334
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3639
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5259
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0120
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0794
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4381
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9795
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 7086
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0115
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3951
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001166

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: ELECTIONS IN THE EAST: TAMILS UNCONVINCED

REF: A. COL 1061

[1](#)B. COL 1139

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR PATRICIA A. BUTENIS. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: A visit to the Eastern Province by Embassy officers found that Tamils in the East do not strongly support either President Rajapaksa or General Fonseka in the upcoming election and that many would spoil their votes. Only Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) authorities expressed strong confidence in their candidate, incumbent President Rajapaksa, including Chief Minister Pillayan. Interlocutors do not expect major "problems" during the elections, but neither do they expect elections to be fully free and fair. END SUMMARY.

A TRIP EAST

[1](#)2. (C) Embassy officers visited Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts in the Eastern Province from December 13-16, 2009. In Batticaloa, officers met with Government Agent S. Arumainayagam, Mayor Sivageetha Prabhakaran, United National Party (UNP) Provincial Council member T.A. Masilamani, UN officials, a Catholic Bishop, the President of the local NGO Consortium and people who had returned from displacement. In Trincomalee, officers met with Governor of the Eastern Province, Rear Admiral Mohan Wijewickrema; Government Agent and District Secretary, Major General T.R.R. de Silva; Chief Minister Sivanethurai Chandrakanthan (a.k.a. Pillayan); UNHCR, local human rights groups and returned IDPs. Findings on IDPs and human rights issues are reported septel.

TAMILS DISINTERESTED

[1](#)3. (SBU) While much attention has focused on Tamils as swing voters (ref A), Tamil returnees expressed little interest in

the election, stating that neither candidate would protect their interests. Returnees do not trust the government or military, particularly after groups of Vanni IDPs were told they could return home and then were held in closed transit camps for a month. While campaign signs for President Rajapaksa were visible in town centers and along some major roads, rural areas were not posterred. Fonseka posters were seen only in Trincomalee, and in small numbers. Only one of three groups of rural returnees had received any campaign materials consisting of some leaflets for the president.

14. (C) Local leaders stated that many Tamils want a change and were frustrated with a string of broken promises. According to the Catholic Bishop in Batticaloa (protect), the TMVP disarmed with the hope that its members would get jobs, but this has not happened. Provincial Council promises of development and employment have fallen short. The central government promise of devolution of power to the Eastern Province under the 13th Amendment has been broken. On the other hand, multiple interlocutors referred to General Fonseka's war-time statement that the land belonged to the Sinhalese, and minorities should be satisfied with food and housing, as clear evidence that he would not support Tamil interests.

PEACEFUL BUT UNFAIR ELECTIONS PREDICTED

15. (C) Interlocutors predict neither "problems" nor fully free and fair elections. GSL Rajapaksa supporters expressed confidence that the president would win the election and that the East would not see any major election-time difficulties. The Trincomalee GA predicted smooth elections thanks to his

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own tight control of the area ("if someone has not done what they are supposed to do, I call them and they come... like God.") Interlocutors across the political spectrum, however, predicted that Tamils would be pressured into voting through alcohol or intimidation and that many would simply spoil their votes. Some expected coercion to be particularly acute in the Karuna-controlled Kalmunai division of Batticaloa. Additionally, several Tamil National Alliance (TNA) members of Parliament reportedly have directed Tamils to abstain or spoil their votes.

CONTINUED BUT UNENTHUSIASTIC TMVP SUPPORT FOR RAJAPAKSA

16. (S) Chief Minister (and head of the Tamil Makkai Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) party) Pillayan affirmed his (lukewarm) support for the President stating, "we have supported him for a long time; it would be difficult to change." (NOTE: The TMVP, currently part of the UPFA government, announced that it would not campaign for the President on November 28, stating that Pillayan had been prevented from bringing development and jobs to the Eastern Province in his capacity as Chief Minister. The following day, papers reported that Pillayan had denied the previous announcement, and pledged the TMVP's fullest support to the President. Rumors indicated that the about face came after Pillayan was summoned to the President and threatened with his life. A TMVP statement released shortly before the meeting with Embodys appeared to retreat from its support of the President (ref B). END NOTE.)

17. (S) Pillayan judged that returnees in Batticaloa would follow the TMVP's lead and support the President, but that Trincomalee returnees were undecided. He expected that returnees would vote for those who assisted them or might spoil their vote. Asked directly whether the GSL's sudden interest in IDPs would continue after elections, Pillayan's colleagues acknowledged the concern with general nodding and nervous laughter. Pillayan answered that the President had made commitments to both the population and Ministers and "it would be difficult to wash his hands" of them.

UNP CAMPAIGNS WARILY

18. (S) The UNP Council member had begun canvassing for Fonseka votes but noted that intimidation and lack of funds restricted the UNP's campaigns in the East. One interlocutor pointed to UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as the one hope for Tamils because he had "proven himself once before" by signing the 2002 ceasefire as Prime Minister. None of the interlocutors had anything positive to say about General Fonseka himself, but focused on the need for change, the desire to break up Rajapaksa power, and Fonseka's endorsement by the UNP.

COMMENT

19. (C) While commentators have eagerly speculated on the Tamil swing vote, many Tamil returnees in the East do not believe they have a true voice in Sri Lankan politics or governance. Any meaningful GSL move toward reconciliation in the East was conspicuously absent. The Eastern Province's coastal areas and fertile land offer significant potential for development, but, if left unaddressed, Tamil disaffection could undermine progress.

BUTENIS